

Writing Your Obituary
Deut. 34:1-12
October 30, 2011
Kory Wilcoxson

Did you know that we're approaching a very significant day in the history of the church? It doesn't involve mangers or rolled-away stones, but it's significant nonetheless. Nov. 1 is known as All Saints Day, the day on which we acknowledge and remember all those who have gone before and have made it possible for us to be here today. Traditionally All Saints Day was for remembering those who were believers, and it is followed by All Souls Day on Nov. 2, which was the day reserved for remembering non-believers who had died. And both those days followed All Hallows Eve, or as we know it, Halloween, or as I know it, Eat Your Kids' Candy Day. This is the time of year when we reflect back on those who have gone before us.

But I used to do that *a lot* more often. While I was a news clerk at the *Louisville Courier-Journal* newspaper, one of my jobs was taking the obituaries. I would sit at a computer for eight hours doing nothing but taking information from funeral homes about dead people. Every day was All Souls Day. It was a pretty sobering job, not only because of the subject matter, but because I was reminded over and over again how a lifetime of experience could be boiled down into a paragraph.

I guess that's why today's passage from Deuteronomy looks so familiar to me. It's an obituary. If I were preparing it for print, it would read something like this:

Moses, age 120, died today in the land of Moab. Cause of death is unknown, but when you're 120, do you really need a reason? Moses was a former prince in Egypt, shepherd, and delivery boy (for the nation of Israel). He belonged to Brothers of the Burning Bush and Sea-Parters Club. He is survived by his wife, Zipporah; an adopted son, Joshua; and a million followers. There will be no visitation and a private funeral, with burial to follow in an undisclosed location. In lieu of flowers, the family asks you to observe a 30-day mourning period.

This last chapter of Deuteronomy is more than just an obituary; it's the culmination of a 40-year journey for Moses and the Israelites. This must have been a bittersweet moment for Moses. When God leads him up to the top of Mount Nebo, God shows Moses something no one else could see – a vision of the whole Promised Land spread before him, from Gilead to Dan to the Negev to Zoar, and area of about 1000 square miles. But Moses was seeing more than just geography and terrain; he was seeing the future of Israel spread out before him. He was seeing God's vision of what the people would become, inhabiting the Promised Land and building up a holy nation of people to praise and worship and serve God. Even at 120 years old, Moses' eyes were not dimmed.

I know of a lot of people I've run across in life who've also been on long journeys. They may not be 120 years old, but they've seen a lot. And I also know how we tend to think of and treat these people. In our society, we stampede to the new and discard the old. Newer is better, older is just older. We even take a book full of wonderful stories and characters and guidance for living and call it the "Old" Testament.

We assume that with old age comes old hopes, old dreams, old vision. We assume that as age increases, our ability to contribute, even to lead, decreases. But age brings with it a wisdom, an experience, a vision, that you simply can't buy in stores or read about in self-help books. Age is not something you're born with; you have to live it. I can think of several people in churches

in which I've worshipped, people who were old in years but who taught me more about what it means to be a Christian than any sermon has. These people drew on their experience to teach me about living life and loving God. No matter their age, they still have something to say, so it would serve us well to listen.

For those of you who are closer to 120 than to 0 today, you are like Moses in that you have a gift to give, a legacy to leave. You have stories and lessons and wisdom that are invaluable to us. Please don't think no one wants to hear it, because your story is what will live on well after your time here on earth is done. Last week we observed Children's Sabbath as a way to celebrate the gift of children in our congregation. So maybe today is Elders' Sabbath, because we also should celebrate the gifts that our more experienced members bring to our church. No matter how old you are, you still have something to give. You are still valued and valuable; you are a blessing to this church. Don't forget that. And please forgive us younger folks when we don't listen like we should. We need to be better at that.

For my part, I'm trying to be a better listener. Several years ago my grandmother on my dad's side came up to visit us. One night I sat with her on our couch and asked her all kinds of questions about her childhood, her marriage, what it was like having my dad for a son. I had never talked to my grandma about any of these things and I was fascinated to learn from her. She visited in October, and on Dec. 28 she died of a heart attack. She was one of those saints we remember this time of year, people who made a difference in our lives.

And yet, she wasn't perfect. She had her flaws. Does that mean her wisdom was less valuable, that her legacy was tarnished? Some of us may worry that we won't leave much behind us because the journey has been far from perfect. Or maybe we feel passed by as the world moves forward at lightning speed. Maybe we feel like we can no longer run the race. But God hasn't called us to finish first, only to finish well.

Moses is the epitome of that statement. He wasn't perfect...or was he? The dictionary defines "perfection" as "having done thoroughly." And if anything was done thoroughly, it was the task God set before Moses. The eulogy says it all. Moses was a man God knew face-to-face. Moses gave his life to God (although with a bit of kicking and screaming), did what was asked of him (even when he doubted himself or his task), served Israel (even when they whined and complained) and led them almost into the Promised Land. That's what I call doing a job thoroughly, even if he did it incompletely.

How do we define perfection? Is it a life in which everything is accomplished, when the Promised Land is reached? Has anyone ever actually done that? If you're like me, your road to the Promised Land is blocked by the realities of life. Wait until I'm a little more comfortable, then I'll cross the Jordan. Wait until I'm making X amount of dollars, wait until the kids are in school, wait until the kids are out of school, wait until everything's paid off, wait until... We could play that game the rest of our lives, waiting until the next hurdle is cleared, only to find another hurdle, waiting to reach the top rung of the ladder, only to find there the bottom rung of the next ladder.

I think we need to shift our focus a bit here. Instead of seeing perfection as the destination, we should take a look around at our blessings, our God-given gifts, our reasons to be thankful, and see that perfection is not a destination; perfection is in the journey. We get so focused on reaching our own Promised Lands that we fail to see the value in the journey, and in the end, fail to see that ultimately, maybe our Promised Lands are unreachable, and God has a different Promised Land in mind, the one we're living in now. Life passes us by as we wait for the ideal conditions, and when it's too late we realize those conditions were just that, an ideal,

not a reality. We can “what if” our way right through our life and miss what God has for us right here, right now.

That’s where Moses can speak a word to us. As he stood on that mountaintop looking ahead to the Promised Land, Moses could also look back at a life where he didn’t wait for the something better to come along. He didn’t say, “That burning bush is for someone else.” He didn’t say, “Pharaoh won’t let the people go, at least I tried.” He didn’t say, “These people are driving me nuts!” OK, he did say that, but he didn’t quit. He didn’t say, “Wait until I get to the Promised Land, then I’ll...” Moses had the vision to see not only the beauty of the destination, but the reward of the journey.

And yet Moses was also content to die knowing that in the end, perfection was not up to him. In the end, it didn’t matter whether his life was complete in the way we think it should have been. I am troubled by the fact that Moses didn’t finish the job. His work wasn’t done. He didn’t die with all the ducks in a row. He died with unfinished business.

But what this passage teaches me is that there will always be things uncompleted. That’s life. Every night when we go to sleep, there’s something, and if you are like me, more than one something, that didn’t get finished. And this passage says to me that that’s OK. This passage tells me that completion is not in my hands -- it’s in God’s. Moses did what was asked of him while knowing that in the end, it was God who made his life whole, not his list of accomplishments.

For Moses, that’s where his story ended, on the mountaintop overlooking the Promised Land. And it’s not only his story we conclude this morning. This passage is more than the ending of Moses’ life or the book of Deuteronomy. It’s also the end of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. This is very interesting. The Torah doesn’t end with the Israelites frolicking in the land of milk and honey; you have to wait until the book of Joshua for that. No, the Torah, which for a long time was the Bible, ends poised on the edge of the Promised Land, not in it.

The Bible is a never-ending story. It doesn’t end at the end of Deuteronomy and it doesn’t end at the end of Revelation, either. Interestingly, both of those books end by describing what lies just ahead, the Promised Land, and the New Jerusalem, or kingdom of God. Both endings lead to new beginnings. In both cases, it is what follows that fulfills that vision, it’s what’s left unfinished that keeps the promise alive for the next generation. That promise is fulfilled for Deuteronomy by book of Joshua, as the Israelites entered the land promised to Abraham by God.

But wait, you say. There is no book after Revelation! What about the new Jerusalem? What happens next? How is the promise fulfilled?

A professor of mine, Gerry Janzen, once said that the Bible is the first four acts of a five-act play. We are the fifth act. We are responsible for keeping the promise alive, for passing on to those who follow the wisdom we’ve gained, just like Moses did with Joshua. What will your obituary say? I hope it says something about knowing God face to face. I hope it says you enjoyed the journey and still had your vision. And I hope it says you left some unfinished business.